

I am writing in support of HB 5300 because it is essential that our legislators, who will be held accountable for the loss of independently accredited community colleges in twelve districts throughout the state, have final say on whether it is a good deal to trade a college for a branch campus of an expensive, centralized bureaucracy. This week our accrediting body has made it known that it will not stop the BOR from pursuing this foolish endeavor, so it is up our elected representatives to do what is best for their constituents. We are already seeing how the bureaucracy that has been created so far wastes more money on maintaining itself than it does improving services for our students.

Over the past five years, the hardworking faculty and staff at Connecticut's community colleges have been working against the tide to provide support for the thousands of students who rely on our services to improve their lives and realize a better future for themselves and their families. While everyone is aware of the challenges that the pandemic has presented for all educators, our biggest challenge has actually been CSCU's focus on spending good money after bad to establish an academic bureaucracy that diverts direct support for our students to create new jobs for administrators whose primary responsibility is to maintain that bureaucracy. As a result, during the times when Connecticut's citizenry most needed support, our system's newly hired bureaucrats centralized essential services in a manner that compromised our ability to communicate with and support our students. Further, hundreds of thousands of dollars were wasted on memberships and conferences to promote changes that were later abandoned without realizing any benefit for our students.

I have spent my professional life working side-by-side with some of our most vulnerable students. Our community colleges play a bigger role in their lives than they do in most. When we allow a centralized bureaucracy to make sweeping decisions that affect teaching, curriculum, and support services, these are the students who have the most to lose. When system leaders become focused on impressing an accrediting agency by chasing down every new educational fad they can find, these are the students that fall through the cracks.

These students stand the most to lose from a confusing academic bureaucracy where decisions that affect their lives, hopes, and dreams are made far away by people who see them as data points. They begin at our community colleges with the cards stacked against them, so it is essential that decisions are made locally to address their evolving needs. In a traditional college setting, faculty and advisors tell students that they need to adjust their lives to make college their number one priority, but for men and women with children and jobs that same line of reasoning just does not make sense. For these students to flourish, they need to be the focus of decisions about curriculum, support services, and programming. They will not get the attention they need and deserve when all the most impactful decisions are made by distant administrators who have never seen them.

These individuals have so much to offer their families, our society, and themselves, but they need colleges (not branch campuses) staffed by accountable professionals who are sensitive and responsive to their learning needs. There are two things that make a significant difference in their success or failure.

The first is the ability to participate in decision-making processes that affect their education. Our colleges have been able to serve our communities effectively because academic and resource allocation decisions are made with direct input from the students they impact – which does not happen in a tangled bureaucracy where decisions are made by off-site individuals whose career goals depend on impressing the next bureaucrat in a long chain of command. With local decision making, our students get input both directly and indirectly. At most of our colleges, student positions are included in all major committees. Our local academic leaders understand the importance of getting student perspectives and want students' insights to inform decisions that affect their classmates and themselves. Perhaps the most important way that students have input, however, is indirectly through the faculty, counselors, and staff they work with on a daily basis. You see these professionals serve on all of our colleges' committees and provide the information that our local administrators need to make the decisions that impact students' lives. These people are passionate advocates for the students they teach and serve, and they provide local administration with current information on what students need to be successful. It is somewhat disturbing that as our student population has become increasingly diverse with members of historically disenfranchised groups, our system is moving access to the decision-making process out of our schools, miles away, where meaningful student participation is almost impossible.

Every effective approach to supporting students is the result of the careful coordination of the efforts of staff who provide student support services with the efforts of faculty responsible for teaching and learning in the classrooms. Since the system has become committed to the bureaucracy that is Students First consolidation, local college leaders have been hindered from effectively coordinating these essential resources because the new organizational model includes a reporting structure in which personnel who provide support services report to bureaucrats upstate instead of the local dean and CEO. This structure undermines effective and responsive leadership and promotes decision-making processes that negatively impact our students.

The second thing that our colleges provide for the students they serve involves options to access supportive resources that meet them where they are instead of where someone else thinks they should be. Anyone who has taught a class in our schools knows that many students desperately need academic support and curricular options designed to address their needs and accommodate their circumstances. A one-size-fits-all approach falls hopelessly short for many students. As part of their desire to market the value of bureaucratic bloat, system leaders have declared that no one needs developmental education anymore. Despite mountains of evidence that students need and want coursework and support that addresses their learning needs, the new bureaucrats are in the process of creating policies *that do not comply with PA12-40 legislation* and will put many students in coursework where they are overwhelmed and have fewer options for getting the support they need.

The bureaucracy created by consolidation has resulted in decision making that is unresponsive to the needs of so many of our adult students and out of touch with the citizens our colleges serve. By shutting out the voices of local students and ignoring the perspectives of the professionals who serve these students, system-level leadership will continue to base their decisions on the faulty assumption that all students are served by the cookie cutter approaches they devise and fail to see that what is most likely to work in a rural community may not be equally effective for meeting the needs of students in our urban communities. Community colleges are effective because they are sensitive to the students of the communities they serve. The term *state community college* is an oxymoron, and its organizational structure will disenfranchise our students and those who know them best from participating in decisions that affect their lives.

Finally, legislators should pass HB 5300 because as calls for transparency grow this election cycle, the financial wastefulness of the Students First bureaucracy will be exposed, and once the public becomes aware of the ramifications of losing their local colleges, constituents will call upon their local legislators to explain the loss of these valuable community resources. Branch campuses are not colleges, and centralized bureaucrats cannot work flexibly with community leaders to solve local needs and promote prosperity. Trading a college for a branch campus is a bad deal, but if it must be done, then those who represent the people should be the ones to make the final decision.